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No. 025/2013 dated 8 February 2013

Abe's Defence Policy: Leveraging the 'Senkaku Effect'?

By Euan Graham

Synopsis

Since returning to power Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made defence central to his policy platform. To what extent does this mark a new departure for Japan, and how significant are current tensions with China as a driver?

Commentary

JAPAN'S PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe, since returning to power, has made defence central to his policy platform. The ongoing tension over the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute escalated following claims that Chinese warships near the islands "locked on" to a Japanese helicopter and destroyer in separate incidents in January. This latest turn of events has a two-fold impact on Japan's defence policy.

At one level, it fuels a growing perception that Japan must defend its southern approaches against China's encroachment, in the worst case including the actual seizure of territory. In this regard, Abe seems to be positioning himself as simply responding to a long-term trend. At the same time, the mobilising appeal of Japanese sovereignty under threat in the Senkaku/Diaoyu has a more instrumental value to his administration as it seeks to re-cast Japan's domestic debate about defence and the constitution in more nationalistic terms.

Change or continuity?

Upon returning to office after December's Lower House elections after having served for less than a year as prime minister in 2006-07, Abe was quick to claim that the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had charted his course on security policy. There is some basis for this posturing. Although Abe's conservative leanings have ushered in a more overtly nationalist agenda into the defence debate, especially on reforming the "pacifist" constitution, there is currently more continuity than contest between Japan's main political parties on defence - a remarkable turnaround from post-war ideological battles over whether Japan should even possess armed forces.

A review of the DPJ's record on defence reveals substantial overlap with Abe's current priorities. In 2010, the Ministry of Defence instituted National Defence Programme Guidelines that enshrined the concept of "dynamic defence", signalling a shift away from Japan's static cold war dispositions in recognition of a changing security environment.

The key “dynamic” was a slow-brewing concern about China’s strategic intentions and fast-growing maritime and missile capabilities. Defence planners saw a requirement to re-orient the Self Defence Force’s (SDF) posture to guard Japan’s south-western approaches and outlying islands, notwithstanding the overwhelming US military presence on Okinawa. Miyako and Ishigaki islands, further south, were reportedly identified some time ago as potential strategic targets, on the basis that this would give the Chinese navy unfettered access to the Pacific.

Concern about China’s strategic intentions

Japanese conservative thinking is further influenced by an undercurrent of suspicion that China harbours designs on the Ryukyu chain at large, as a former tribute kingdom that was incorporated relatively late into Japan. Tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are therefore not seen by Japanese strategists as a political problem in isolation, but as the thin end of a wedge for China to gain a foothold on the “First Island Chain”. They point to the fact that China has ramped up its naval activity in the area, sending its first flotilla through the Miyako Strait in 2010 and transiting other ‘egress’ points from the East China Sea.

Also under the Noda administration, the 2011 Mid-Term Defence Programme made provision for the upgrade of Japan’s surveillance and monitoring capabilities along the axis of the Ryukyu island chain. Funds have been allocated for the construction of a new coastal monitoring facility at Yonaguni, a mere 100km from Taiwan and the closest Japanese island to the Senkaku. Early warning is currently provided from Miyako, some 200 km from the Senkaku, while Japan’s closest interceptors are based 420km away, in Naha, Okinawa.

Also under the DPJ, the authorised number of submarines was raised from 16 to 22. Following its controversial decision to “nationalise” the Senkaku islands, the Noda government assented to a US\$213 million supplementary budget for the civilian coast guard, as the designated patrol force around the islands. Against this backdrop, basic continuity in defence and security policy is apparent, as is Abe’s pragmatism. Despite campaign rhetoric, there are no indications yet that the new administration is contemplating stationing defence personnel or equipment actually on the islands – a certain provocation for Beijing. There are, however, significant changes in pace and direction.

The Abe administration has announced a raft of measures, including Japan’s first defence budget increase in over ten years. The other major departure is Abe’s intention to amend the “pacifist” Constitution. Signals that his government will reconstitute a review panel on collective self-defence and revisit the US-Japan Defence Cooperation Guidelines, while important, are both overhangs from Noda.

A defence outlay up 0.8 per cent on the previous year is a largely symbolic increase and slated procurement funds are already heavily leveraged by replacement aircraft acquisitions and further BMD commitments. The government’s decision to authorise nearly 300 additional SDF personnel also reflects inter-service compromise, divided equally among Air, Maritime and Ground forces.

Japanese ‘Marines’?

Funds were set aside last year to acquire four AAV-7 amphibious vehicles. The number is tiny but it marks a threshold, since amphibious assault has previously been deemed beyond the limits of self defence. Earlier in 2012, Ground SDF personnel trained alongside US Marines in a small-scale beach assault exercise on Guam. Although the SDF lacks amphibious doctrine, the Maritime branch possesses significant amphibious capability, including three Osumi-class flat-topped transports, each equipped with two hovercraft. Larger helicopter carriers could also be used to transport a battalion-sized force. If constituted, any island defence unit would probably be formed along inter-service lines, but drawn mainly from the Ground SDF.

Abe has followed up the Noda government’s supplementary funding for the Japan Coast Guard by creating a new 600-member unit with 12 vessels in Ishigaki specifically to cover the Senkaku. This will also reduce reaction times compared with patrol vessels based in Okinawa.

Setting aside an ongoing debate about whether Japanese aircraft can fire “warning shots” over the Senkaku islands, a proposal is under consideration to deploy F-15s to Shimoji on Miyako island, where a 3,000 metre civilian airstrip is already in place. This would halve the distance from Naha to the Senkaku, though it would also require hardened facilities and could encounter resistance from the Okinawa prefectural government. To supplement its static monitoring capabilities, there are reports that Japan has employed US-made Global Hawk UAVs to monitor the East China Sea, and is interested in acquiring the UAV by 2015. New reconnaissance satellites were launched recently and are funded separately from defence.

More significant than these modest material changes, Abe’s administration is likely to target reforms of Japan’s

politico-legal “software” aimed at permitting the SDF greater flexibility to employ its existing capabilities independently, if necessary, as well as alongside the US.

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